Partnerships in Public Libraries: The Potential of Oral History

James Anthony Schnur

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.usfsp.edu/fac_publications

Recommended Citation

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Works at Digital USFSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital USFSP.
Overview:

Many Floridians know little of the historical heritage of their adopted state. Despite a permanent population that approaches 14-million residents, Florida remains a state where support for cultural and historic programs remains tenuous at best. For example, state authorities placed much of the funding and organizational responsibility on individual counties and non-profit organizations for the planning and implementation of events to celebrate the state's sesquicentennial—or 150th anniversary of statehood—in 1995.

Librarians often collect materials that preserve the history of their local communities. Smaller libraries or branches often include a section with books about Florida, while larger libraries, special collections, and archival reading rooms include a number of rare and unique treasures that document social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of history. In addition to printed works and manuscript collections, library facilities also maintain photographs, diaries, postcards, broadsides, and similar ephemera.

Unfortunately, few Florida libraries actively collect oral histories. The special preservation requirements, cataloging concerns (i.e., do you catalog single interviews, or create MARC records at the collection level?), equipment requirements, and
access/liability issues often discourage libraries from developing oral heritage programs that document "nearby" history.

Meanwhile, most historical societies and similar non-profit cultural entities operate with few—if any—paid staff and rely on the goodwill of volunteers, and many of these individuals have little if any formal library training. Support for oral history programs by such organizations can change as one board of executive officers replaces another, and programs started by such organizations often fail to take into account the important legal, ethical, and conservation concerns that professional librarians, archivists, and historians have thoroughly documented in their scholarly literature.

Thus, despite its substantial value as a primary source, oral history remains an underutilized form of historical scholarship in Florida. Those facilities that have developed oral history programs have a special responsibility to work with professional organizations and serve as mentors to other groups interested in this field. In this lecture, I will attempt to offer an overview of present-day trends in oral history, discuss the problems and prospects of using and including oral history in specific library settings, and briefly outline some of the effects of an active oral history program on library operations. Finally, time permitting, I will present a brief oral history primer, or, what you should about the oral history process when someone asks you about it at the reference desk. But first, a little background about me and how I became interested in oral history.
Background: Me and Oral History at USF:

My first true experience with oral history in the academic world occurred as I was revising an undergraduate paper in 1989. I had written a paper on the interposition and school desegregation crises that occurred in Florida during some of the civil rights struggles during the 1950s that had won a prize for the Florida Historical Society. I eagerly embarked upon revisions with the hope of publishing this study. As part of my research, I wrote to LeRoy Collins, Florida's governor from 1955 to 1961 and—at that time—a frequent columnist in the St. Petersburg Times, requesting an interview. I also enclosed a copy of my paper.

With a sense of disbelief, just a few days later I received a reply from the former governor, welcoming me to visit him at his law office in Tallahassee. Soon thereafter, I met with Collins and had a wonderful interview that covered a number of topics. He spoke candidly about many events that placed him in national newspapers, including his refusal to follow other southern segregationist governors who preached "segregation forever."

About 40 minutes into the interview, I looked down at my tape and realized that it could only record 30 minutes on each side!!! I tried to conceal my frustration, and, after the Governor finished another long response, I quickly turned the cassette to the other side and continued to record the conversation.

While I took meticulous notes, I know that I did not document everything that Collins mention during that lost 10 minutes of tape. I felt like such a fool—my first interview was with a
former governor, and I didn’t even have the horse sense to remember to flip the tape!

Unfortunately, my first visit with Mr. Collins was also my last visit—while we corresponded a few more times, he died shortly thereafter in March 1990. I could never again ask him to clarify his comments.

My first oral history interview taught me a number of lessons as a student of history. Later, as a paraprofessional archivist at the University of South Florida’s St. Petersburg campus, I learned how to appreciate the value of creating, building, and promoting an oral history collection development initiative. Finally, to complete the circle, as an adjunct professor of Eckerd College I require students in my Florida History class to complete an oral history interview and write a paper describing the experience. I can therefore speak on the practice of oral history from a number of perspectives. Let me describe the USF program in greater detail:

The Oral History of Modern America collection represents the largest single oral history archival collection that I’m aware of in the Tampa Bay area. The USF St. Petersburg initiative has experienced phenomenal growth since its inception. During the 1980s, the campus library held fewer than 40 oral history transcripts, and most of them resided in a single collection: the Papers of Nelson Poynter. By early 1993, however, the USF St. Petersburg library had expanded its collection development policy to include oral history interviews. By the spring of 1996, the
Oral History of Modern America collection had grown to nearly 500 primary source interviews, as well as 425 recorded lectures from the Campus Lecture Series, 120 recordings of the WUSF-FM "Florida Report" program, and a nearly 60 video recordings with interview sessions. The opening of a new library facility last summer with a "real" special collections--rather than a broom closet--assures the continued growth of the collection.

MAKE TRANSITION TO ORAL HISTORY WITHIN SPECIFIC LIBRARIES--
1. Introduction to Oral History and the craft of historical research
2. Brief overview of the development of Oral History scholarship
3. Present-day trends in the field of Oral History
   A. Uses of oral history and ethnographic studies
   B. Audio/visual concerns
   C. New technology/Internet sites
4. Potential for using/including Oral History in specific library and research settings
   A. Public libraries (partners in the community)

Useful for community history programs, genealogy, and partnerships with cultural affairs departments (for example, the city library may collect audio or visual recordings of signal events in the community’s history, major performances, speakers, etc.). May also include liaison activities with local historical societies—such as the local library serving as a repository for the recordings of a local non-profit that lacks secure storage area of its own.

The advent of county-wide and regional cooperatives has greatly expanded access to library materials in a variety of formats. In addition to the traditional print materials, many patrons come to the library to pick up the latest fiction videos and music CDs. Copies of locally-produced community histories in the non-fiction section can also generate a great deal of interest, especially if the public library already has a substantial “Florida” collection.
Potential for oral history: May bring members of the local historical and cultural societies into a closer partnership with the library—some of them may join the friends association and may even get involved on the library board.

Possible roadblocks: Some local organization(s) must take an active role in producing or compiling these oral histories; many smaller public libraries or branches lack the secure space required for archival materials such as original copies of interviews and their supporting documentation; similarly, many smaller libraries rely heavily on copy cataloging because they lack the resources to do a great deal of original cataloging—most oral histories are unique rather than mass distributed, and therefore require original cataloging; partnerships with other organizations require some form of contractual relationship or, at the least, some paperwork that describes who will retain ultimate authority for the disposition of the collection (is it on loan from the historical society, or did their executive board transfer ownership? Those questions should be answered BEFORE a collection is placed in the building).

B. Academic libraries (town and gown relationships)

College and university libraries serve as the major repository of large oral history collections. Some, such as the collection at Columbia University, include over 5 decades of interviews in a variety of formats. Others, such as the Oral History Program at the University of Florida’s Museum of Natural History, were started as projects of a faculty member (Samuel Proctor, in this case), and blossomed into substantial enterprises. Other institutions, such as USF St. Petersburg, have recently entered the area and hope to seize upon the potential of linking town and gown.
If a university hopes to develop a broad-based oral history initiative, it must include professionals (including librarians), scholars, students, and community input from a variety of areas. Librarians who serve as faculty liaisons with departments such as anthropology, geography, history, American studies, environmental studies, humanities, and sociology should keep aware of any oral history or ethnographic studies. Bibliographic instruction in archival or media sources may be required to acquaint students with the proper use of oral histories. Community or campus advisory boards may view oral history initiatives with “movers and shakers” as a way to strengthen ties between community leaders and the campus. When the advancement office calls asking for how to proceed with such a project, we need to be able to do more than to refer them to the appropriate call number range in the stacks. Finally, scholarly “think tanks” and institutes might conduct extensive community-based research that requires a level of expertise in the interviewing process. We need to use our expertise at performing in-depth reference interviews to help such persons understand the importance of developing a sound research base.

In the academic world, oral histories may physically reside in a number of areas. Often they are housed in closed stack areas of special collections departments, in film/video libraries, or at the university media center. At USF St. Petersburg, for example, I keep the paperwork and master copies of tapes in the ORAL HISTORY OF MODERN AMERICA collection in one section of the closed stack area, with the “use” copy of the tapes in another section. I do this for ease of access to the “use” copies, but—more importantly—to prevent a disaster in one area of the stacks from wiping out my collection. In addition, many of the
lecture series tapes and videos reside in a separate room in the A/V department.

As an archivist who appreciates the value of historical documentation, I am always concerned about potential “disasters” waiting to happen. And, for good reason: USF St. Pete campus library is in the flight-path of Albert Whitted airport in downtown St. Pete, and planes buzz over all day. Also, the contractors installed a SINK in the closed stack area—I won’t tell you what I said in my initial reaction when we first visited the new library facility and saw the sink—especially since the last building this company built for the university had trouble with bursting pipes—“LOWEST BIDDER”.

The USF Tampa Campus has also embarked upon a very ambitious oral history program through its special collections and development areas. This series of interviews, coupled with the library’s strong emphasis in collecting Floridiana, bodes well for the documentary heritage of Florida’s west coast.

Potential of oral history: college and universities often have more resources than smaller public libraries to catalog, arrange, describe, and preserve oral histories; such primary source material may aid present and future scholars, as well as link the town and gown bond. Importantly, such oral history initiatives must not take upon an air of ivory tower exclusivity—community members and non-academics must be involved in the process.

Possible roadblocks: Acquiring interviews in a variety of formats (reel-to-reel, 8 track, etc.) requires an ethical obligation to attempt to provide access, even if the format is outdated and equipment is unavailable. Preservation and
conservation measures must go hand-in-hand with access. Regular monitoring of the collection, including occasional reformatting as necessary, should be part of any collection development initiative. Also, some people in other areas of the institution may view oral history as a new electronic form of the vanity press (i.e., to make a big donor happy, some university relations officer might promise to interview him or her and place copies in the library’s collection—to prevent hard feelings at a later time, librarians need to become proactive and maintain their liaison activities with ALL areas of the university involved in the oral history enterprise.

C. Special libraries/archives/historical societies

D. School media centers

Some students in Florida’s public schools are required to complete a unit of Florida history. Although I personally wish that even more time was devoted to this important subject, I believe school media centers can also use oral history for as a way to promote Florida history, family studies, and a better understanding of the community. Special themes and celebrations may serve as a springboard for oral history (Black history month, women’s awareness month, and other cultural celebrations). Also, as some schools begin to experiment with on-campus television production labs or consider the possibility of placing the school yearbook on CD, the media specialist will certainly want to stay “in the loop” to offer professional advice on
what the media center can—or cannot—do with the resources available. If the media librarian works in an environment where teachers and administrators provide at least some advance notice, the librarian can assist in the creation of lesson plans and offer good input. If, on the other hand, you find yourself

5. Effects of an Oral History initiative on library operations

A. Acquisitions/donor relations

B. Tech services/cataloging/arrangement and description

C. Reference and public services

D. Preservation and conservation

E. Advancement office and public relations

6. A quick Oral History primer, or ... what to know when somebody asks you about the Oral History process (abbreviated from handout)

A. Program development (selecting interviewees and parameters, designing interview questions, selecting equipment, etc.)

B. Program implementation (the interview process, aesthetics and ethics of the interview)

C. Program preservation (to transcribe or not to transcribe?, archival concerns, etc.)

7. New frontiers of the future: Oral History in the next millenium

8. Questions and answers